Catholic Christians who gather to worship on any given Sunday have several things in common with Christians of other denominations throughout the United States. They come to praise and worship God, to experience the paschal mystery, to come to be spiritually fed by the Word of God, to express in song their faith in God through Jesus Christ, to be strengthened through the prayers and presence of community, and hopefully to be moved to action on behalf of the community. At Sunday Eucharist, the individual and community are open to the presence of God. I have become aware that it is on Sunday at the eucharistic celebration that ministers have the most contact with their particular communities. It is a time when the individual and the community may be most attentive and open to the presence of God.

Over twenty years ago at the eucharistic celebration, I had a profound religious experience that has had a transformative effect on my life and has shaped my ministerial involvement and understanding of God. It was during an experience of liturgy as a young adult when I felt that I was being called by God to become more active in the church. Before this experience, I often felt there was something lacking either in my engagement or the dynamic of the liturgy.

During that one Sunday morning at Mass, I clearly felt that God was calling me to become more involved in the liturgical celebration. God clearly said to me, “Get involved.” From that experience, I first became a lector, then began work with the youth in the parish. Finally I committed to a life of full-time ministry. All were influenced by my experience of liturgy. I began feeling that someone—God—was “calling my name” to make the move to more active participation in my faith community. Furthermore, my parish community in the 1980s began a discernment process regarding its role in the community. During this time, I became aware of direct correlations between the experience of Eucharist and

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the slow transformation of the community. I then began visiting other churches and began to notice that those churches that had vibrant, participative liturgies seemed to have vibrant communities focused on justice and transforming of community.

In my readings and study, I specifically began to question the relationship between spirituality and liturgy. Don Saliers writes about the connection between worship and the ordinary lives of Christians. He states that worship is a corporate dialogue and communion with God. It is a corporate enactment in word, silence, rite, and song of the community's memories of God so as to invite the presence and power of God to come to awareness (Saliers, 21).

This is very true of my own experience of liturgy. Furthermore, in my continuing studies and research, I have come to question if there is a relationship between what takes place on Sunday and the individual and community's experience of discernment.

Discernment is a gift from the Holy Spirit. It is not only specifically for those who are in religious life, but also for the one in any state in life who wishes to be open to the will of God. It is about making good choices, choices that are life-giving. With today's renewed focus on spirituality as well as discernment, it is important to note that our Catholic Christian tradition offers a wealth of guidance and insight to the contemporary men and women who are looking to follow God's will. For this column, I look at St. Antony of Egypt, the writings of Ignatius of Loyola, and Mary Benet McKinney, O.S.B. These sources allude to several elements that are indicative of a discerning individual. There are five elements: humility, listening, community, Scripture, and contemplation.

Humility. Ignatius considers humility so important to discernment that he states that it is necessary for salvation (Ignatius, nos. 165, 54). Humility allows the person to be open to God's will and to realize that it is not by virtue of their own giftedness that they make decisions but by the grace of God.

Listening. Listening is an important element that contributes to discernment. There must be a willingness to be open to hearing/listening to the voice of God. McKinney stated that listening to the members and to God is of utmost importance in her model of discernment (McKinney 2005).

Community. St. Antony's sense of being called to solitude was transformed by his realization of his brother monks and broader community's need for his guidance and input. Mary Benet McKinney in her work Sharing Wisdom wrote primarily of the community's role in discernment. While Ignatius, in the Spiritual Exercises, primarily addressed individual discernment, it is interesting to note that McKinney used his “Deliberations” as a foundation for her writings on communal discernment. McKinney's entire theme is one of communal discernment that does not negate the need for individual reflection and prayer.

Scripture. The Word of God has primacy in our tradition. For St. Antony, his decision to live a monastic life came about from his hearing the Scriptures proclaimed one day (Athanasius, nos. 1–4). McKinney begins her process with a reading from Scripture that she states should follow the theme the community wishes to address in their decision making (McKinney 2005). Ignatius writes in his Spiritual Exercises of the importance of reading the Gospels during the second week of the Exercises, which is the week during which he addresses discerning a choice.

Contemplation. Contemplation is being aware of the presence of God and abiding in that presence. Contemplation for Ignatius is “standing in the presence of God” (Ignatius, no. 232). McKinney states that discernment calls for the ability to be contemplative. She further states that the leader of the discerning community is called to a sensitivity of the presence of the Spirit both in the group
and in the leader’s own lived experience (McKinney, 59).

All these elements can be witnessed and experienced within the course of the liturgical celebration. During the celebration of the Eucharist, the individual and community are open to the Spirit of God. With this in mind, I propose that pastoral ministers pay attention to these five elements as they are experienced at the Sunday Eucharist. I also strongly suggest that by also developing the spiritual value of four dimensions of the Roman Catholic Mass they can contribute to an overall transformative experience of the eucharistic celebration that will empower the community to Christian discipleship. These are (1) music, (2) the Liturgy of the Word, (3) prayers, and (4) announcements.

Music. It is said, “Singing is praying twice.” Music lifts the people in ways that deeply touch the soul. Mary E. McGann states that music is human action—something people do, something people make (McGann, 22). Each Sunday, the choir and congregations in churches across the world make music, which personifies the religious experience of a people. Music can reinforce the Word and it can propel one to action. One can think of the primary song of the civil rights movement—“We Shall Overcome”—to realize the importance of music to the action of a people. A question to ask as liturgical minister is: How is the music in the liturgical celebration being used to invoke action and to invite the community to discern the will of God?

Liturgy of the Word. The Word of God has the power to transform a community. As noted, Athanasius described how listening to Holy Scripture catalyzed St. Antony’s decision-making (Athanasius, nos. 1–4). He writes that when Antony was eighteen and after the death of his parents, he began reflecting on the life of the apostles and on one particular occasion during the proclamation of the Gospel (the story of the rich man and Jesus, possibly Luke 18:18-22). Antony felt that the Scripture was speaking directly to him. He immediately gave away most of his possessions, though he remained attentive to his sister’s needs. Later he was in “the Lord’s house” and heard the Gospel of Matthew 6:34, “Do not be anxious about tomorrow.” Again he felt that the Lord was encouraging him beyond his initial response. This time he was able to totally give of himself to the Lord, giving his sister to another’s care and relieving himself of his final possessions. Is it also possible that both these instances took place in the context of the Eucharist?

Today, do we within the course of our liturgical celebrations give time to reflect upon the Word of God? Many times I have asked persons who have attended the eucharistic celebration, “What was the Scripture?” Oftentimes I would receive a blank stare and the utterance, “I don’t remember.” Is time given to reflect on the Word of God? Do we rush through the Liturgy of the Word in such a manner that time is not allowed to “be still and know that there is God”? The power of the Word of God as proclaimed by the preacher can transform a community. How are ministers prepared to proclaim the Word and how is our community receiving the Word? These questions are of utmost importance.

Prayers. Bishop Edward Braxton writes that liturgies that are living prayers rather than obligatory rites are effective in part because someone has paid attention to the details contributing to their uplifting power (Braxton, 117). Prayer can transform hearts and minds to action. During many liturgical celebrations, I have noted that the prayer of the faithful tends to focus on internal needs of the community (health of the members, financial concerns, and social events). I would suggest that the prayers not only focus on the internal needs of the community, but
some attention in the prayers should focus on the spiritual and justice needs of the surrounding community and the broader church.

Prayer can also transform a community and move a community to action. The team should also be mindful of developing prayers that specifically ask for God’s guidance in making decisions.

Announcements. The announcements can be a time to plant the seed for future individual and communal involvement in parish and community. Particularly if the announcements flow from the theme of the liturgy, they can reinforce what has taken place. I would suggest that if the pastoral ministers wish to form the community in a way to elicit more active involvement in the community as well as being mindful of the discernment process taking place among their members, they pay some attention to the natural progression of announcements. For example, they might ask a question of the members during the announcements that they then must reflect on during the upcoming week. It is important also for the ministers to be aware of what is going on in the broader community and to share this information with their members. It may be important to be attentive to the social justice themes of our church. Do the announcements address any of these themes?

The fruit of authentic discernment is discipleship. Discipleship is not just about acting independently, but about being in relationship with God and community. The hope is that if we are attentive to the elements within the liturgical celebration described in this essay, then there will be continued transformation within the worshiping community. Then, guided by the Spirit of God, our communities will be disciples of Jesus Christ, mindful of their role in making the world a more just and loving society.

References


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